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HOW CAN THE PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL REACH INDIVIDUALS?¹

EDUCATIONAL thought at the present time is being directed from the subject-matter of instruction to the pupil himself, from the text-book to the pupil. We are hearing in our educational gatherings such sound doctrine as this: "The choice of subject-matter does not depend upon the laws of logic, but upon the law of the pupil's development," and "Educational value is not a quality which belongs inherently to any study; it is only as it fits the time, the place, and the child, that such value belongs to it." From Harvard comes the cry, "One of the most important functions of the high school is to facilitate the discovery and development of individual interests and capacities." Fifty years ago the education in our New England academies, if it was narrow, was at least precise and definite. The multiplicity of high-school subjects has broadened the secondary education of today, but, on the other hand, in attempting to teach one pupil too many subjects, mental energy has been dissipated. Hence has been brought about a reconsideration of the relative value of subjects in secondary education. It is not enough any longer to show that a subject is worth learning; we must show that it is better worth learning than such other subjects as are or may be displaced by it. Were there time, this paper might well go into

¹ An address before the Hampden County Teachers' Association by Mr. F. W. ATKINSON when Principal of the High School, Springfield, Mass. Mr. Atkinson is now Superintendent of Public Instruction in the Philippine Islands.

a consideration of values in secondary education. As for myself, I am of the firm conviction that the most important principle of value is that that high-school study is of most value which assists most effectually the highest possible evolution of the individual.

Heredity has preserved and transmitted to the individual certain moral, physical, and intellectual characteristics. By means of environment these may be modified. Under environment are included those conditions and influences without that modify or affect that within the individual. The pupil's mind is not a blank page, upon which we teachers may write what we will. Recent studies in heredity suggest limitations to the teacher's efforts. In these limitations there is something almost fatalistic. It is maintained by some men of science that education is useless, or even powerless, because human evolution is necessary, and that evolution always depends on heredity. To those "the child's whole moral destiny is contained in it while yet unborn, and in later life this destiny develops itself relentlessly." Unless we teachers believed to the contrary — that there was an ascent of life and morality, how hopeless our task would be. The powers attributed by some thinkers to education in the past have been exaggerated. It was, I think, Helvetius who asked if all the difference between men does not spring from nothing but the difference of instruction they have received : if talent and virtue alike cannot be taught. In spite of advances in biological science, some of our normal schools have continued to teach the "unfoldment" principle. If a thing will not unfold, we may, perhaps, lay hold of it and unfold it. There is, we believe, some remedy for the effects of heredity. But if a thing will not develop, there is nothing to do except to improve the environment and to furnish a motive. Incarnate in the organism of every human being is, first, the heredity or ancestral habit (or natural instincts), and, second, acquired from his environment, the individual habit (or artificial instincts). These artificial instincts constitute a power capable of keeping in equilibrium the heredity instincts. The problem of education, therefore, consists in creating in the mind at every stage of its evolution

artificial instincts capable of eliminating natural tendencies toward evil and the proper development of tendencies toward good. It is of the greatest importance that we know "where we are at" educationally. To repeat, the individual develops by innate forces, and in contact with an external environment. The innate force cannot be changed at the will of the teacher. He is limited to partial control of the environment. We teachers, by the process of what the psycho-physiologists call "suggestion," are to cultivate these inherent powers and see that they reach their highest and finest growths.

The scientific cultivator of the soil must know agricultural science in its various departments, he must know besides, its many kindred sciences, chemistry, botany, physics, etc. Yet how much more must the educator know. If he would be fully trained for his profession he must know not alone physiology and psychology, but something of biology, anthropology, political, and other sciences. Above all, he must be versed in what John Stuart Mill called the science of human character. Perhaps the most imperative duty of the modern high school teacher is to attempt systematically and sympathetically to know the individual pupil approximately and to estimate the effect of the various influences upon him. By the study of what boys and girls are we learn of what they are capable. Difficulties in the way of observing the peculiarities of the pupil and his surroundings are the overcrowding of classes, the large number of classes to a teacher, and the departmental system of teaching. Pupil study takes time; teachers must do outside a great deal of correcting and preparation for recitation. Yet brief observations will not do. Teachers of small high schools and of academies have in this matter an advantage over city teachers. Whatever the hindrances, these differences in mental endowment and home surroundings must be known if the one principle of value is to be applied with any accuracy and precision. The high-school teaching corps which would put into successful operation an elective system of high-school course of study should remember that all knowledge, every time it is not assimilated, is an added burden to the

mind, and represents dissipation of mental energy, and that to determine the number and kind of subjects we advise a pupil to elect, we must consider not merely their nature, but the relation existing between them and the capacity of the individual mind. A wisely administered elective course of study without some pretty definite knowledge of individual needs and capacities, is an incongruity. The elective system has come, and come to stay, for it is only with such a system that a high school can adapt its opportunities and demands to the tastes and capacities of individuals. Greater the freedom in choice of studies, provided this freedom is used in accordance with interest, capacity, and future calling, greater the achievement.

Let me correct right here any false impression that may have arisen in your minds. Individualization has its limits, for the pupil must needs be early accustomed to regard himself a rising member of society, and, therefore, to consider others. The object of education is "simultaneously individual and social; it is, to speak accurately, the search for means to bring the most intensive individual existence into harmony with the most extensive social life." The individual should not be considered apart from the family, the state, and the race. The teacher who recognizes the dynamic value of natural inequality of capacities, and utilizes them, preferring to develop peculiar capacity, will do an important service for society. Under the system of pupil study used in Springfield, not only the average marks of the ninth-grade pupils are transmitted to the high school, but some description of the pupil himself. The questions submitted for guidance in supplying this information touch upon character, scholarship, special interests, outside work, home conditions, etc., leaving much to the latitude of the grammar-school teachers. From the parents still another kind of information has been obtained; they have answered questions in regard to health, eyesight, hearing, recreation, home study, reading, tastes, temperament, character, etc. The pupil has only been asked to furnish data on reading. The high-school teachers using the following as guide, have extended their observations to matters concerning the pupil's physical well-being, to

the phenomena of his mental life, to his relations with his parents, teachers, and fellows ; also to his outside interests, home relations, etc.

Objections which were pointed out as likely to be brought against the plan have not been raised. Enough has been done to show that the plan is practicable, entirely in the interest of the pupil, and of great assistance to both teachers and principal. It has brought the grammar schools and the high school closer together. Not alone have the grammar school principals sent character sketches to the high school at the beginning of the pupil's course, but they have come to the school frequently and discussed with the principal the pupil's progress.

It has tended to unify the work of the teachers of the different departments. Instruction has become personal and individual. To use a football term, we have come to do "team work." Our monthly teachers' meeting has become a sort of seminar for the mutual understanding of individuals. Special cases have been discussed with a z  st equal to that of a body of physicians. Some principles of educational diagnosis and educational *materia medica* have been brought to the front.

I haven't time now to describe many "cases"—individuals who need special treatment. I am sure, however, we might profitably spend our time in treating these—"absent treatment," of course. Has not every school its one or more delicate girls who return after the summer vacation looking tolerably well, to break down in the middle of the fall term, to be absent from school for a few days or weeks, to return and struggle on with their work, but finally in the spring to drop out altogether? What would you high-school teachers advise? No school? Partial course? Or what? Here is another individual, a girl who has too much imagination for her own good. What do you "prescribe" for her? Mathematics? Shall we attempt to balance, modify this imaginative tendency for the girl's good? How? Again, here is a boy who possesses no imagination, is commonplace and prosaic and yet an original thinker. Would you use all your efforts to illuminate and expand his life by teaching him imaginative literature, especially poetry, or would

you make the most of his ability to think clearly and forcibly? In the same recitation division there are an immature girl who patiently works out ten problems in the most mechanical way possible, and a lazy, indifferent boy—and yet no fool—who, once aroused from his indifference, performs one of the ten problems and shows that he can thoroughly and completely understand an example when he tries. Would you use the same methods in teaching these two algebra? Which one gets the more real discipline out of the recitation, the girl who performs the ten examples, or the boy who does one? Another boy is alive to every sensation from without; in the Latin and Greek classes his attention is easily distracted. The importance of manual training and laboratory work for such a boy is at once admitted. In experimentation and carpentering there cannot be wandering of attention. Shall such a boy be compelled to fit for college largely along linguistic lines? We teachers find ourselves as never before realizing that there is a great difference in the rapidity with which pupils can acquire knowledge and in their ability to recite what they have learned. As time goes on we are adapting our methods to the individual—this one is judged more by written work, that one by oral work. The nervous pupil is a legion, yet it is not sufficient to know that many high-school children are nervous, but that this or that individual is nervous. So it is just as important to know this one has trouble with poor eyesight or hearing and that one with some other physical defect. Growing out as a result of our pupil study we teachers have made a special investigation of medical inspection, and physical instruction. We teachers have come to believe that the physical strength of the individual and his power to do school work go hand in hand. Let us hope in the twentieth century that every city high school will have its gymnasium and its physician. Any plan of pupil study starts with a handicap if there is not a teacher of physical instruction who can make physical tests, measurements, etc.

In our endeavors to discover the boy or girl we have met with every coöperation from the parents. The letter of inquiry to the homes, besides furnishing valuable data to the school,

have reminded the parents of a necessity to see to it that the school and home work together. Consultations with the teachers and principal have resulted. In many cases, parents have made it known that recreation and repose, so important to the growing youth, were being encroached upon. Parents, too, have assisted in controlling "outside interests," which are, as everyone knows, a constant menace to the prosperity and efficiency of the school.

There never can be a perfect course of study exactly suitable to all until all are created equal in mental and physical capacity, and until all live in the same environment. This has been generally recognized, and it would be impossible to find a secondary school with its single course, although fifty years ago this was a very common educational phenomenon. The planners and administrators of the Springfield high-school course of study start with the assumption that every boy and girl possesses some peculiar capacity. Their principal object is to enable and encourage the largest number of boys and girls to pursue their appropriate studies.

It is evident to them there are limitations to this principle. Tastes and talent while revealed by some in the grammar school or early in the high school are not by all. Mr. Search, while in Pueblo, seems to have succeeded in showing how a school can be organized and administered without some sacrifice of individuality among its members. In reading a description of his plan, my breath is taken away to read, "Each pupil actually and absolutely recites every chapter and line of his Latin." We have not arrived in Springfield to any such educational Utopia as outlined in the Pueblo plan. The association of boys and girls in divisions and classes seems to be necessary as long as we have a limited number of teachers. Classes need to be about as small in number as taxpayers will permit; in Springfield they average from twenty to twenty-five. I am not sure but the association for a common purpose of high-school students into small teaching groups is the best thing. A tutor may better instruct one pupil than any group of pupils, but for the purposes of education association is better than isolation.

A course of study must be also consistent with the satisfaction of inevitable modern demands. Specialization must be restrained in so far as it is necessitated by demands of the community, by economical reasons or as it imperils the common corporate life of the school. A certain rigidity is justified by the increasing demands of the higher institutions for which the boys and girls are preparing, and by the variety of the callings in life for which they are preparing. In our course, certain studies are prescribed for everyone. These are such subjects as form the common stock of educated people. English, a study every pupil is bound to know, is required of everyone throughout the course. Too early specialization is made impossible in the first year by the "common course." The only choice to be made is between Latin, French, or German. In the second year, besides the prescribed English, either geometry or physics must be taken. As a student advances into junior and senior years, provided he is not preparing for a higher institution, with the exception of English no study is prescribed.

In the first year the student has become conscious, and his teachers, and sometimes his parents also, of whatever aptitudes and purposes he may possess. At the beginning of the summer term every pupil is required to make a list of his studies on blanks provided for the purpose, for the following year. This list is signed by pupil, and must be approved and signed by the principal and the parent or guardian. The minimum number of recitations a week for a sophomore shall be fifteen, for a junior sixteen, for a senior seventeen; of which thirteen for a sophomore, fourteen for a junior, and fifteen for a senior, must be prepared exercises. These elective blanks are all examined by the principal. This examination leads to a large number of consultations with grammar and high-school teachers, with pupils and with parents. The pupil is not permitted to be led by whim and caprice to take this or that study. Neither is he permitted to take up a study that strikes his fancy and drop it directly the novelty wears off, and perseverance is required. Able, but unambitious boys and girls are not allowed to take advantage of the rule designed to benefit their less gifted classmates. I refer

to the weekly minimum requirement. On the whole I believe the elective course is most favorable to the boy and girl of brains. The strong and ambitious are given every opportunity to take extra studies and make extra preparation. In beginning foreign languages, in algebra, geometry, and in the sciences, every fifth period is omitted by those who are doing satisfactory work. This unprepared recitation is used for individual instruction of those who need it. Frequently the hour is occupied in learning, under the teacher's instruction, how to study. Certain pupils take hold of a foreign language slowly, others start in with an aversion to mathematics. This extra period permits more thorough and patient teaching of these students.

Our experience convinces us that electives are desirable and practicable. Freedom of election, to be sure, brings its responsibilities to all parties concerned. Nothing but good, however, arises from this. The flexible course carefully administered has given to the teachers more attentive and more enthusiastic classes, has furnished more definite and precise tests of intellectual progress, and above all, a real opportunity to foster individuality and originality. It has brought about a better understanding and more sympathetic relations between the home and the school.

If the individual is the unit and the class the multiple, all cannot be judged by the same standards. As there must be a flexible course of study, so must there be a flexible marking system. As we say on our reports: "The aim of the school is to bring the work up to the best quality which the individual pupil is capable of. The flexible letter system of marking is used because it tends to place the teacher's judgment of a pupil's work on a broader basis than the numerical system allows; the work done is marked with consideration of the whole matter of the pupil's effort, ability, power of application, capability for improvement, degree of interest, and the resulting degree of scholarship." The A, B, C, D, E, system is used because it permits us to vary the scale according to the individual as far as possible; what is "C" work for one pupil might not be "C" work for another. Let it not be thought we mark

merit rather than scholarship. A boy or girl, however conscientious and faithful, cannot get a high rank unless this effort brings certain results. Intellectual self-reliance is what we aim to teach as well as the learning of facts. Our teachers give sufficient written work and know their pupils well enough to see through pretense of interest in the lesson. We do not give a pupil a final "A" rank unless we know that this pupil has the power of continuing to do this excellent quality of work. Beginning with October, reports are sent home bimonthly.

Beginning with September and after that every two months, sometimes oftener, teachers send to the principal the names of pupils who are doing unsatisfactory work; this does not mean necessarily they are not passing. In connection with the names there is given some statement of the reasons for failure or for unsatisfactory work. All these pupils are seen by the principal. In many cases parents are written to, and a number of parents are sent for. These warnings, coming as they do after a month's work, and while a month remains before records go on the books, are helpful and encouraging. The data furnished makes the interviews with pupil and parent definite and eminently satisfactory.

No marks are given for deportment. It is believed this is an individual matter. There is not school "self-government" in the letter of the law, that is, no formal senate or organization of pupils for the purpose; but there is self government in the spirit of the law. The body of pupils must not be the unit of government, but the individual. Every disciplinary measure should tend to inculcate in the individual the spirit of honor and self-control. The principle of self-government is carried out in various ways. Between recitations a five-minute interval of real relaxation is allowed, that is, talking is permitted during the passing and getting drinks of water. The individual student understands that he is to be in his seat and all quiet at the end of this intermission or else the privilege will be taken away from him. Also, because of this intermission, no communication is allowed during recitation time. Teachers are frequently called from their rooms and the pupils are left to themselves. There is

no supervision either in the reference library, lunch room, or in the yard. In these and other ways we try to create such a spirit that each individual pupil will feel it his duty to uphold the standard of school behavior.

The problem of the individual and the public high school has not been solved. I have but attempted to bring out a little more prominently the significance of individuality, and to outline some practical considerations which must be taken into account in its solution. There are many difficulties which seem to prevent its complete solution, but I think I see light shining through them.

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